

Deborah, God's Woman of Wisdom

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Faithfulness is expressed in using our gifts for God's purposes, trusting in Him for victory, and giving Him glory for whatever we accomplish.

As a teenager, I listened to stories told through music. I remember a song that told the story of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. I remember listening to Steven Curtis Chapman sing about how following Jesus is "a great adventure." Our church taught me about the work of Christ when we sang, "On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross..." Songs teach us through the stories they tell.

? What songs can you think of that tell a story?

? Why do you think these songs stick with us?

When important moments in history take place, they are almost always captured in some form or another. Either we report on them (journalism) or recount the events as a story (history) or capture their significance in poetry or song. In the biblical account of Deborah, the author used two forms—narrative and poetry—in order to tell us the story of God once again rescuing His people. Judges 4 is the account of a historian; Judges 5 contains the lyrics of a song. Both praise the God who rescues.

In this session, we will study the account of Deborah, a woman filled with wisdom, whom God raised up to judge the people of Israel. This was a woman who used her gifts in service to God, exhibited great faith in God's ability to save, and then gave glory for His mighty works. In Deborah, we see a picture of a faith-filled life that utilizes wisdom and courage in obedience to God.

1. Faith leads us to use our gifts in service to God (Judg. 4:1-7).

¹ And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD after Ehud died. ² And the LORD sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. ³ Then the people of Israel cried out to the LORD for help, for he had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years.

⁴ Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel at that time. ⁵ She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment. ⁶ She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, "Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you, 'Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun. ⁷ And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops, and I will give him into your hand?"

Again the Israelites found themselves in the same Judges cycle. Unbelief was the root of the Israelites' idolatry. They did not believe that God could satisfy them. So they kept chasing after other gods by doing what was "evil in the sight of the LORD" (v. 1).

In response, the Lord allowed them to be oppressed by a foreign king named Jabin through his general named Sisera. His army included 900 chariots ready to terrify any enemy that would rise up. This was a brutal blow to the Israelites, and finally, after 20 years, the people cried out to God.

Once again, God gave His people an unlikely leader. He raised up Deborah to be the judge over God's people. Of the 12 judges listed in the Book of Judges, Deborah was the only woman. She proclaimed God's word and faithfully spoke on His behalf. Day after day, the people brought problems for her to consider and offer a judgment. She was a prophetess, and she was the only judge we see using her gift of wisdom while not leading the military.

Isn't it wonderful how God uses unlikely people to lead? Maybe you wonder if your gifts can be used in service to God. Perhaps God is calling you to begin a new small group in your church, but you feel like your gifts are inadequate. Maybe God has a certain ministry opportunity on your heart, a way to serve your community, love your neighbor, or invest in missions. Let the way God chose to work through Deborah strengthen your faith that He will use your gifts to accomplish His purposes.



Voices from Church History

"Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold; take my intellect, and use every power as thou shalt choose, every power as thou shalt choose."¹

—Frances Havergal
(1836-1879)



What are some ways we can discover the gifts God has given us?



What happens when we choose not to use our gifts in service to God?

Barak was Deborah's general, and he led the army of God's people. At first glance, it might seem like Deborah was filled with faith and Barak with fear, but this was probably not the case. Barak said he would fight Sisera's army—if Deborah would go with him. Deborah was the representative of God's voice in this passage. Barak wanted to know that God would be with him, just as Moses did in Exodus 33 when he begged God to be with the people of Israel.

So Barak demonstrated faith (Heb. 11:32), albeit hesitantly, and he obeyed by preparing an army of 10,000 men. Barak used the gifts God gave him to walk in faithfulness to his calling.

Here were two very different people—a female judge and a hesitant general—coming together to walk in faithfulness.

In this microcosm we see how the church today moves forward in unity, as one body with many parts. Some, like Deborah, lead with wisdom and counsel. Others volunteer to lead small groups and teach children. Some will change diapers in the nursery, while others will open their homes to foster children. All of us have a role to play in the body of Christ (Rom. 12:4-5).

2. Faith leads us to be courageous in facing impossible odds (Judg. 4:12-16).

¹² When Sisera was told that Barak the son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, ¹³ Sisera called out all his chariots, 900 chariots of iron, and all the men who were with him, from Harosheth-hagoyim to the river Kishon. ¹⁴ And Deborah said to Barak, “Up! For this is the day in which the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the LORD go out before you?” So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with 10,000 men following him. ¹⁵ And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak by the edge of the sword. And Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot. ¹⁶ And Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-hagoyim, and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left.

The day of war had arrived. Consider Barak’s army: they knew they were outmanned when it came to weapons (Judg. 5:8). The odds were stacked against them—except God was on their side. And so they stood there and wondered what God was going to do. Maybe they retold one another the story of the exodus: “Remember what God did when He parted the Red Sea and our fathers walked on dry ground? Remember when our families came into the promised land with Joshua and the rivers were parted? What is He going to do now?”

Deborah and Barak and the people of God had faith in the Lord’s words. He said they would be victorious. Because He is a faithful God, their faith in His victory was secure.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

65. Work of the Holy Spirit in Life of the Christian

The Spirit’s work in the life of a Christian begins in the work of salvation in bringing a person to faith in Christ and is continued through the work of sanctification in helping the Christian to become progressively more like Christ throughout the course of his or her life. He also empowers and indwells believers, intercedes on their behalf, and equips them with special gifts for the service of God’s kingdom. He is the Comforter to the believer and aids us in properly interpreting the Bible.



What is the significance of Deborah telling Barak that the Lord had gone out before him (Judg. 4:14)?



How was this word meant to encourage and challenge Barak?

The hinge of this narrative hangs on verse 14: “Does not the LORD go out before you?” Faith in God is what leads us to be courageous when facing impossible odds. Faith is demonstrated by our belief and obedience, our trusting in God and desire to obey Him in faith. Our faith is not rooted in our giftings, found in our skills, or propped up by our ambitions. Our faith is in the sure Word of God and in His unshakable character. As the people of God, we build our lives on the promises of God. No other foundation is stable.



Voices from Church History

“This is a life of faith, for God will try the truth of our faith, so that the world may see that God has such servants as will depend upon His bare word.”²

—Richard Sibbes (1577-1635)



What happens when we have more faith in our gifts than in God's power?

3. Faith leads us to give all glory to God for working through us (Judg. 5:1-11).

¹ Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day:

² “That the leaders took the lead in Israel, that the people offered themselves willingly, bless the LORD!

³ “Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; to the LORD I will sing; I will make melody to the LORD, the God of Israel.

⁴ “LORD, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water.

⁵ The mountains quaked before the LORD, even Sinai before the LORD, the God of Israel.

⁶ “In the days of Shamgar, son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were abandoned, and travelers kept to the byways.

⁷ The villagers ceased in Israel; they ceased to be until I arose; I, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel.

⁸ When new gods were chosen, then war was in the gates. Was shield or spear to be seen among forty thousand in Israel?

⁹ My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel who offered themselves willingly among the people. Bless the LORD.

¹⁰ “Tell of it, you who ride on white donkeys, you who sit on rich carpets and you who walk by the way.

¹¹ To the sound of musicians at the watering places, there they repeat the righteous triumphs of the LORD, the righteous triumphs of his villagers in Israel.

“Then down to the gates marched the people of the LORD.



Sometimes songs are the best way to communicate a story. Songs teach. The song of Deborah and Barak was a victory song. We resonate with this song because we have encountered the same God. We recognize His faithfulness.

Consider the role of singing in Christianity. Other religions aren't known for singing and writing hymns and praise songs. Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism are not marked by song the way that Christianity is. As Christians, we can't seem to help but sing. Our faith sings. And here, after God gave His people the victory, Deborah and Barak broke out into song.

 Why is it important to give God glory when He works through us?

 What happens when we take credit for what God has done?

The focus of this song is not on the characters in the story but on God as the rescuer. The leaders' egos and the people's accolades fade away in light of the glory of the one true God (4:14). It was the Lord who called Deborah to sit as a judge over His people. It was the Lord who gave Barak skills and leadership to assemble and train an army. It was the Lord who gave Sisera into the hands of a housewife (Jael, the woman who struck down the mighty general with a tent peg). It was the Lord who went out before them.

Why did the people sing? To praise the Lord and to remember His faithfulness. Deborah and Barak knew that the people would be prone to forget the mighty works of God. That's why they gave them a song of remembrance.

In the same way, we have been given songs throughout the Bible (Exodus 15; the Psalms; Revelation 5) that are meant to remind us of what God has done. In the singing of these songs, we are remembering and retelling what God has done on our behalf. In our singing, we encourage and build up one another (Col. 3:16). We proclaim: *The Lord goes before us.*

Voices from the Church

"We can, and should, live our lives and order our memories not only historically but theologically—not simply recollecting what happened, or what we did, but searching out what God was doing. This keeps us from over-honoring ourselves in success, or despairing in our struggles."³

—Tim Keller



How does singing praise to God fortify our faith?



In what ways does singing build unity in our church?

Conclusion

The story and the song of Deborah is our story; it's our song. We were captive to sin and we had no hope on our own. Satan and his "900 chariots" were stacked against us. We could not fight on our own. And the Lord stood in our place, fighting on our behalf, claiming victory over the enemy in an unlikely way—through a cross reserved for criminals.

Today, we are the people of God because God has in Christ crushed the head of the serpent (like Jael crushed Sisera). It's through the great rescue—the great story—that we have been forgiven once and for all. We are like the Israelites, continually running after things we think will give us life. What does the world offer? The same things the serpent offered in the garden—you can be greater than God; you can have glory; you are the hero. But here we see there is one Hero. The hero of this story is God alone. The hero of the story of our rescue is Christ alone.

If you are struggling with the pull of sin in your heart, come and repent. Call out upon God to forgive you, and He will. If in this moment you realize that you have never been rescued from your sin, call out to Him and ask Him to rescue you. God has spoken, God has fought the battle for you, and God will get all the glory.

CHRIST CONNECTION: Deborah was the chosen leader of God who not only rescued her people but also ruled with wisdom. Her life points forward to Jesus Christ, the Wonderful Counselor whose kingdom is marked by justice and righteousness.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to use our gifts in the service of evangelism (of those who do not know Him) and edification (of those who belong to His family).

1. What are some obstacles to faithfully using your gifts in service to God, and how can you overcome those obstacles?

2. How can we strengthen one another when the obstacles to using our gifts seem insurmountable?

3. Write a prayer asking God for specific opportunities to use your gifts in the service of evangelism.

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